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# Postcolonial Ecocriticism and the Recovery of Hope: Okri, Dangarembga, and the Spiritual

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This essay stages a comparative ecocritical reading of African and transnational texts—Cajetan Iheka's *Naturalizing Africa*, Ben Okri's *Every Leaf a Hallelujah*, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body*, Greg Sarris's *Becoming Story*, and Karen Armstrong's *Sacred Nature*—to examine how narrative re-situates the human within more-than-human worlds. Drawing on Iheka's "aesthetics of proximity," postcolonial theory, and critical posthumanism, it contrasts Okri's hopeful, child-centered fable of multispecies reciprocity with Dangarembga's portrayal of "slow violence," psychic dispossession, and eco-touristic commodification in neoliberal Zimbabwe. Indigenous and spiritual frameworks in Sarris and Armstrong further disclose ancient precedents for posthuman ethics, foregrounding humility, ubuntu, and sacred kinship with land as counters to anthropocentrism and capitalist extraction. Across these works, the essay argues for a rehabilitated, accountable human—neither sovereign nor effaced—whose ethical regeneration depends on listening to nonhuman agencies and imagining decolonial, ecologically attuned futures.

*Keywords:* ecocriticism, postcolonial ecology, critical posthumanism, ubuntu/relational ethics, slow violence

In the first chapter of his acclaimed 2017 study, *Naturalizing Africa*, Cajetan Iheka focuses on what he calls an "aesthetics of proximity" and the "entanglement of humans and other beings in African literary texts", and concludes in his Epilogue with a discussion of the "rehabilitated human located at the interstice with the nonhuman with all the rights and responsibilities to the nexus". In between, he explains what this implies in his connection of literature (e.g., the famous Somali novelist, Nuruddin Farah) and postcolonial resistance in the Niger Delta, and in agriculture, gender, and manual labor. Building on the work of Rob Nixon, Evan Mwangi, and Jane Bennett, the book interrogates human agency's often unacknowledged limitations, and arguably runs parallel to religious studies based upon Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). Iheka writes, for example, about water's symbolic role in some African cultures, as the home of supernatural beings, deities, and gods, and emphasizes that "with that connection of the human and the divine, water takes on greater meaning and significance, a sacredness". One critic notes, "What Iheka accomplishes in this book is the unmasking and foregrounding of the agential powers of the other-than-human". Iheka speaks of "the artificial borders created over time to separate us into humans and animals, developed and developing nations, first and third world, black and white, etc.". Describing such borders as artificial again foregrounds the question of human agency, the artifice of imagining control over the uncontrollable, the domination of nature suggested by the command in Genesis to name creatures and in the process define them.

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Iheka's work typifies the focus of scholarship I intend to discuss in what follows: the role of narrative in situating the human in nature, bolstered by Karen Armstrong's *Sacred Nature* (2022), Greg Sarris's *Becoming Story* (2022), and Byron Caminero-Santangelo's *Environment at the Margins: Literary and Environmental Studies in Africa* (2011). I will contrast Ben Okri's environmentalist fairy tale, *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* (2021) and Tsitsi Dangarembga's stark *This Mournable Body* (2018), seeking hope even in an obscured and victimized natural world of which humans are but one participant.

The two fictional works in question, Okri's *Every Leaf a Hallelujah*, and Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body* are arguably at two ends of a spectrum, with Okri fitting easily into an expected pro-environmentalist beautifully illustrated children's story of a little child venturing alone into a dense forest to retrieve a magical flower that has properties needed to heal the child's dying mother. The mother confesses that she herself had also been called by the forest when she was a young girl, but was too frightened to enter—and that reluctance set a pattern for her entire life. The child, Mangoshi, now listens to the trees and hears them talking, and entering the forest sees that the trees had become seriously ill since her mother turned down the forest's invitation (or, as it turns out, cry for help). The child is fearful of wandering too far in, but does so nonetheless and learns a great deal about herself and about her place in the forest and in nature itself. Unlike her mother, she confronts the loggers who are doing the damage. In return, the baobab tree grants the little girl the magical flower that heals her mother. It is a simple and imaginative demonstration of symbiosis.

The story is obviously didactic, and its message is clear and unambiguous. In simplified form Okri's account repeats Native American writer Greg Sarris's poetic book, *Becoming Story*. In it, Sarris writes that

> the natives in the coastal regions of central California… seldom venture far into redwood forests. For a host of reasons, we regarded the tall trees with great respect, even fear. The forests were so dense, the trees so tall, that before long you could find yourself in total darkness. Amidst countless and similar-looking trunks, you might quickly become lost, unable to see a way out. The dark forests were home to grizzly bears, the most powerful creatures of the land and, at that time, more numerous than people. (2022, p. 135)

Sarris has served as the Tribal Chairman of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria since 1992, and is currently in his 17th term. He represents Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo peoples from Marin and Sonoma Counties in California. For Sarris and his people, "The landscape was our sacred text, and we listened to what it told us". What it told them was as follows: "physical violence was considered the lowest form of warfare; if you struck a person, you only demonstrated to others you had no spiritual power. Cutting down a tree was also considered a violent act". This respect for a quite foreign life grew from a humility that seems unusual today, "predicated on a profound respect and a fundamental belief that no one of us is the center of the universe". This respect and humility became a philosophy for life for Sarris and his tribe and "maintained for so long their sustainable relationships with both one another and the land" (2022, pp. 135-136). Again, a symbiosis with nature, and with one another, based upon an acknowledgment of one's more humbly delineated position in the world.

This suggests that both Okri's and Sarris's texts align well with Amy Ratelle's description of the child reader in her study of *Animality and Children's Literature and Film*, in which she notes that "western philosophy's objective to establish a notion of an exclusively human subjectivity is continually countered in the very texts that ostensibly work to configure human identity" (2014/2015, p. 4). She refers here to canonical children's literature and films that ostensibly construct human identity but inadvertently highlight animal subjectivity via focalization,

narration, and anthropomorphism (*Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell (1877)), which uses equine first-person narration to critique animal labor and evoke empathy; *Charlotte's Web* by E. B. White (1952), featuring animal protagonists that disrupt species hierarchies; *The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents* by Terry Pratchett (2001), exploring sentient rats and ethical interspecies relations; and earlier works like *Dick, the Little Poney* (anonymous, 1799), tied to 19th-century animal rights discourses. Children speak to their dollies, to animals, and to trees; adults talk to their pets. Some listen, as well, and though this is characterized by some as at least whimsical if not demented in adults, it echoes Sarris's insight into his life in the Pacific Northwest.

Thus, it is clear that a theory as apparently contemporary as critical posthumanism actually has quite ancient roots. As Pramod Nayar writes, "Critical posthumanism doesn't see the human as the centre of all things: it sees the human as an instantiation of a network of connections, exchanges, linkages, and crossings with all forms of life" (2013, pp. 4-5). But it is a fragile sensitivity, as former religious nun Karen Armstrong writes in *Sacred Nature: Restoring Our Ancient Bond With the Natural World*:

> There was no word for what I recall as a strange but compelling luminosity in the woods and lanes near our home that I could not make my adult companions see. They assumed I was thinking of the fairies pictured in my story books, but it was more of an impersonal, all-encompassing radiance. Once I went to school to be inducted into the rational worldview that governs modern life, I, like Wordsworth, experienced the "light and glory die away, / And fade into the light of common day". (2022, p. 6)

What adults see through children's eyes, and perhaps sentimentally try to reconnoiter as a "luminosity", seems to fade away with adulthood—an experience of loss that the romantic poets obsessed over—and which for some returns with age: the "innocence" of our childhoods and our unselfconscious acceptance of our place among the puppies and the trees and all other forms of life with whom we share the world, and dolls and rocks into which we project life and from which we sense a kind of response, if only that of a homeliness that we all share—a home rather than an empire over which humans rule.

The child in Okri's book is taught a lesson about herself by listening to nature, in much the same way that she listens to her mother. This provides us an entrée to Tsitsi Dangarembga's much grimmer novel, *This Mournable Body*, which shows the importance of the care with which parents speak to their children. The book's title has been drawn from Teju Cole's 2015 essay by that name, in which Cole asks a question central to our consideration here. His essay is responding to media coverage of the Charlie Hebdo shooting (January 7, 2015) and wondering how it is that this outrage was given such intense media coverage when drone killings in obscure parts of the globe were being virtually ignored: "We may not be able to attend to each outrage in every corner of the world", he writes, "but we should at least pause to consider how it is that mainstream opinion so quickly decides that certain violent deaths are more meaningful, and more worthy of commemoration, than others" (Cole, 2015, p. 36). Dangarembga's implication is that her young and very vulnerable protagonist is one of those overlooked sites of "violence". The anti-heroine in Dangarembga's novel does not die physically, but we watch her soul dehydrate before our reading eyes. Like the forest in Okri's tale, and parallel in some ways to the unknown victims of drone attacks in obscure parts of the globe, she is arguably an example of Rob Nixon's notion of *slow* violence (much like the violence done to the natural world). "We are accustomed", as Nixon puts it,

> to conceiving of violence in terms that are immediate, explosive, and spectacular, as erupting into instant, concentrated visibility. But as environmentalists, we need to engage the representational and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of what I call slow violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous but instead is incremental,

> as its calamitous repercussions are postponed across a range of temporal scales… The temporal dispersion of slow violence impacts the way we perceive and respond to a variety of social afflictions—from domestic abuse to post-traumatic stress—but has especially powerful implications for environmental calamities. Hence, a major challenge facing us is how to devise arresting stories, images, and symbols adequate to the elusive violence of delayed effects. (2011, p. 257)

Sounding a lot like Greg Sarris, he praises Wangari Maathai, noting that "the Green Belt Movement focused not on conventional ex post facto conflict resolution but instead on conflict preemption through nonmilitary means" (2011, p. 276).

Tambu, Dangarembga's protagonist, is a human victim of the slow violence that Nixon describes, a mournable body like that of the forest that surrounds her village in Zimbabwe and like the one that "suffers" and is weakened but ultimately saves the mother of Okri's protagonist in Nigeria. Iheka writes that he is "wary of the term posthuman ethics" used in Evan Mwangi's writings (like *The Postcolonial Animal*, 2019), because he prefers to retain and rehabilitate the human as a central figure in ethical relations with the nonhuman, rather than fully decentering humanity. Iheka prefers "to think more in terms of a rehabilitated human located at the interstice with the nonhuman with all the rights and responsibilities to the nexus" (Iheka, 2020). And one would like to imagine such a rehabilitation taking place for Dangarembga's ill-fated little Tambu, but there is scant evidence of its happening in the novel—underscoring that the majority of humans, perhaps less than those comparative few in power, are also suffering as the natural world is put under stress. Thus, Iheka reminds his readers of the criticism from Frantz Fanon and Sylvia Wynter of the animalization of the African in colonial discourse. Animals were considered inferior to the rational western subject, so it made sense to link Africans to the state of animality. This denigration carried into postcolonial discourse with writers drawing on animals to metaphorize their abjection" (Umezurike; see also, du Toit). And this is certainly what happens to Tambu; she has sadly interiorized the abjection and re-enacts it. Her biography in the novel is that of a caged animal, with all the characteristics and ramifications that one can imagine playing themselves out in a human context. In response to the discrimination she faces in her job as a copywriter she leaves and finds a job teaching biology. Living in comparative squalor, impoverished, and embittered that her education was cut short after a tantalizingly elite convent school experience, she loses her temper and attacks a student, has a mental collapse, hears voices, is institutionalized for a while, and then moves in with her cousin Nyasha's family in the rural squalor outside the city. One might see here a shift from urban alienation toward grounded existence, countering her earlier self-loathing amid Harare's decay; this hints at quiet resilience without romanticizing it. On the one hand, Iheka argues that "if we are to rehabilitate the human and see the nonhuman as strangers to be respected and shown compassion, then it is time to dismantle the stereotypical association of animals with negativity" (2020). Arguably, Tambu must make this same adjustment in order to heal and inhale a breath of fresh air. And then, slowly, another one.

But the nature portrayed in Tambu's life when she is suffering in the psychiatric institution, before that return to the humbling new beginning with Nyasha, is that described by Tennyson as "red in tooth and claw", and certainly not the radiant source of hopefulness described by Karen Armstrong and Wordsworth surrounded by a loving Mother Nature. In her time of mental distress Tambu tells herself:

> There is a fish in the mirror. … Now you understand. You arrived on the back of a hyena. The treacherous creature dropped you from far above onto a desert floor. There is nothing here except, at the floor's limits, infinite walls. … You are an ill-made person. You are being unmade. The hyena laugh-howls at your destruction. It screams like a demented spirit and the floor dissolves beneath you. (Dangarembga, 2018)

Early on in the book, this unattractive protagonist, misshapen by the expectations of a postcolonial country and the patriarchal injustices meted out to women, is on a bus. One of her housemates is trying to get on but becomes partially disrobed in the process. Somewhat inexplicably, the occupants of the bus, including Tambu, pick up stones to throw at and shame her. It is the reader's first strong indication that Tambu is unhinged from values other than somehow gaining a foothold in a dog-eat-dog world. As one reader puts it,

> her fierce competitiveness and pursuit of material success aren't endearing. But how else is she to avoid remaining one of the wretched of the earth? How else can she "step away from the flies, the smells, the fields and the rags; from stomachs which were seldom full, from dirt and disease?"… She dreads being seen with her peasant mother [described elsewhere as a snake] and one-legged sister. (Morrison, 2020)

In short, as other readers conclude,

> *This Mournable Body* depicts a very bleak picture of a chaotic and corrupt country in the 1990s, where the whole country is in a state of post traumatic stress disorder following decades of conflict… [in which] Tambu herself was brutalised by the experience of racism from the white education she received at the Young Ladies College of the Sacred Heart, in addition to terrible experiences in the war of independence—which meant that she eventually joins the general 90s trend in only looking out for herself in her determination to achieve the success which her European style education trained her to expect. (Wright, 2020)

The various twists and turns ultimately lead her to the book's denouement, when Tambu is hired by a tourist agency that provides eco-tours for Europeans. Competing with another local who promoted urban tours, Tambu comes up with a tour of a so-called typical village—her own. Her neocolonizing boss recommends as follows:

> We're talking, in principle, real eco values, authenticity, like millet and thatch, milk from the udder. We haven't done that before, that's unlocked value. They're talking the rest of it, you know, all those things they say go with villages on… uh, on our landmass, like dancing authentically… minimal, like agh, loincloths, naked… torsos. (Dangarembga, 2018)

The story is told in the second person, as if addressed to Tambu or as if she is speaking to herself:

> As you begin to understand, the air in the room floats to the floor. Outside the birds in the air fly down to roost. The leaves stop taking in carbon dioxide and producing oxygen. Naked male chests are normal in traditional dance. Tracey [her boss] can only be talking about the women. … Forbidding yourself to hyperventilate, you struggle with the changes and to keep hold of your elation. (p. 258)

At this point Tambu is fully aware that she has just been asked to arrange for the topless dancing *by her mother* for European tourists, and she has agreed to do so.

> An ant crawls over the back of your neck. Dozens more creep across your skull. You breathe deeply, resisting brushing any of the insects away. They have visited you so often that you know they are not there. … An insect runs down your arm to dissolve in the crook of your elbow. (p. 259)

In short, the tour is a humiliating example of self-debasement, and coming at the end of the long novel it leaves little room for salvation for this character that we learned to distrust in the two earlier volumes of Dangarembga's trilogy (*Nervous Conditions*; *The Book of Not*). She had presented herself as neurasthenic, as bending over backwards to become British, as her father had done (with results similar to those in other postcolonial novels, like the colonial mimicry of Ganesh Ramsumair in V. S. Naipaul's *Mystic Masseur*). This third volume ends with only the slightest of hints that something better is on the horizon—literally it leaves the last sentence—

> your education is not only in your head anymore… your knowledge is now also in your body, every bit of it, including your heart. You frequently offer to help [your relative] with her studies. This is a small step toward maintaining your knowledge in the location of which [your relative] spoke. (This Mournable, 2018, p. 284)

There is just a whiff here of the world that Greg Sarris describes.

Thus, if we are to read these novels in an eco-critical context, we must see them through the eyes once again of Frantz Fanon, who wrote as long ago as 1963 that the colonized will become beasts of burden:

> Everything will be done to wipe out their traditions, to substitute [the European] language for theirs and to destroy their culture without giving them [the Europeans' language]. Sheer physical fatigue will stupefy them. Starved and ill, if they have any spirit left, fear will [finish?] the job; guns are levelled at the peasant; civilians come to take over [their] land and force [them] by dint of flogging to till the land for them; if he shows fight, the soldiers fire and he's a dead man; if he gives in, he degrades himself. (Wretched, 1963, p. 7)

Tambu has been trained, by her subservient father as much as by anyone, to accommodate herself to the desires and norms of the British overseers, and in the postcolonial setting in which she needs to carve out a secure spot in middle management, she must jettison the family values that had always been tenuous in her upbringing. The result is a complete hollowing out, a mental collapse, and return to the point of origin. Cajetan Iheka (2020) had told his interlocutor: "I cling to the redemptive possibility of the human in the Anthropocene" (Umezurike). If that is at least suggested in Okri's children's book, it is only half-heartedly alluded to in Dangarembga's. The results of becoming alienated from nature play themselves out in this excruciating novel, and underscore the human cost of having grown up in a culture ripped from the land, desperately employed by neocolonialists to engage in deforestation, the over-extraction of minerals, the marketing of one's traditions, and living with the consequent wasting of families and accompanying values.

## Conclusion

These four books—*This Mournable Body* by Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* by Ben Okri, *Becoming Story* by Greg Sarris, and *Sacred Nature* by Karen Armstrong—offer rich terrain for comparative analysis through ecocritical, postcolonial, and spiritual lenses, revealing tensions between human ambition, environmental degradation, colonial legacies, and sacred interconnections with nature.

## Ecocritical Perspectives

Ecocriticism highlights how each text critiques anthropocentric exploitation amid environmental collapse. Dangarembga's novel portrays neoliberal Zimbabwe's urban decay and commodified rural landscapes, where eco-tourism exacerbates poverty and land dispossession, turning nature into a survival commodity (Niemi). Okri's children's book anthropomorphizes forests as vibrant kin under threat from capitalist deforestation, urging multispecies kinship against "species-narcissism". Sarris's nonfiction blends Pomo oral traditions with ecological restoration, emphasizing indigenous land stewardship against settler disruption. Armstrong's historical survey frames nature as inherently sacred, critiquing modern secularism's divorce from earth's rhythms (Karmarkar).

Ecological themes in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body* and Ben Okri's *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* both critique human-induced environmental harm but diverge in tone, scale, and resolution, reflecting what some might see as characteristic Zimbabwean realism versus Nigerian actors mobilizing magic/juju/occult ideas and rituals as tools of political intervention, advocacy, or resistance. Dangarembga exposes neoliberal urban decay

and rural commodification in post-independence Zimbabwe, where land becomes a tool of inequality, severing communal ties to nature amid poverty and pollution. Okri counters with multispecies solidarity, personifying trees as grieving kin felled by capitalist loggers, rejecting human dominion through a child's communion with forest voices.

Both invoke relational ethics—ubuntu in Dangarembga hints at healing fractured ecosystems via collective responsibility, contrasting it to individualism's toll (Ikea and Ibe). Okri's Mangoshi enacts this dynamically, planting seeds and rallying villagers for forest revival, blending activism with ancestral spirits for harmonious interbeing. Ubuntu shapes environmental ethics in Tsitsi Dangarembga's work, particularly *This Mournable Body*, by framing ecological crises as breakdowns in communal interdependence, countering neoliberal individualism with relational harmony.

Ubuntu, a Bantu concept often expressed as "I am because we are", extends beyond human relations to include nature as part of the communal fabric, promoting stewardship rooted in shared vitality. In Dangarembga's Zimbabwean context, it could critique post-independence betrayals where land commodification erodes traditional ties, turning rural spaces into exploitable resources amid urban decay (see, for example, the Laudato Youth Initiative laudato-youthinitiative + 2).

Dangarembga portrays neoliberal capitalism's "uneven development" as antithetical to ubuntu, where eco-tourism and foreign investment displace locals, severing people from sustaining landscapes. Characters like Tambudzai grapple with this fracture, hinting at ethical restoration through revived communal practices that honor earth's role in collective flourishing, akin to unhu (the Zimbabwean Shona-language equivalent of ubuntu) as an "ecologically-linked community" (Niemi).

## Postcolonial Theoretical Lenses

Postcolonial theory uncovers how colonial histories shape uneven development and identity fractures. In Dangarembga, Tambudzai's "sell-out" mentality reflects neoliberal capitalism's erosion of ubuntu communalism, echoing Zimbabwe's post-independence betrayals. Okri indigenizes resistance through a girl's activism, subverting Eurocentric progress narratives that justify resource extraction in the Global South. Sarris confronts California coastal dispossession, reclaiming Native storytelling as decolonial ecology against erasure. Armstrong traces Abrahamic traditions' pivot from sacred animism to dominion, paralleling imperial justifications for environmental plunder (Niemi).

Okri illustrates justice as collective resistance: Mangoshi plants magical seeds to revive the forest, underscoring co-becoming through ethical openness to trees' "whispers" and laments, challenging anthropocentric binaries of human/nonhuman. This extends to broader world-making, as the child's story sways a governor to halt logging, affirming children's voices in fostering inclusive planetary stewardship.

## Spiritual Dimensions

Spirituality emerges as a counterforce to alienation, invoking earth-centered reverence. Dangarembga contrasts neoliberal individualism with ubuntu restoration, hinting at moral regeneration through communal ties. Okri infuses trees with ancestral wisdom and healing agency, guided by earth's voice in a hallelujah of interbeing. Sarris weaves Coyote tales into spiritual ecology, where land embodies ancestral presence. Armstrong posits "sacred nature" as a perennial insight—lost in modernity but vital for ethical reconnection—aligning with indigenous and African animisms across the others.

Spiritually, ubuntu infuses environmental ethics with ancestral reverence, viewing degraded land as a moral wound to the whole—humans, spirits, and ecosystems alike. This aligns with Dangarembga's trilogy arc, where small acts of relational repair evoke ubuntu as a "spiritual garden", fostering resilience against dehumanizing exploitation.

Ben Okri's picture book *Every Leaf a Hallelujah* centers multispecies justice through the story of young Mangoshi, who communes with sentient trees threatened by deforestation, advocating for their rights as cohabitants in a shared world.

The narrative rejects human exceptionalism by granting trees agency—voicing grief over chainsaws and capitalist "developmentalism"—positioning them as responsive kin deserving care, not as commodities. Mangoshi's activism, from heeding the baobab's counsel to rallying villagers against loggers, embodies "multispecies entanglements", where justice demands recognizing nonhuman suffering and contributions to ecosystems like oxygen and healing.

Spirituality and land intertwine in African postcolonial novels as sites of resistance, ancestral memory, and decolonial reclamation, often countering colonial commodification with animist relationality. One turns to the novels of Helon Habila (*Waiting for an Angel*, 2002; *Oil on Water*, 2010) to consider the desecration of land as a consequence of political oppression, resource extraction, and neocolonial exploitation in Nigeria. One might identify spiritual ontologies and trace land as sentient—imbued with ancestors, spirits (e.g., Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*, where soil embodies Mau Mau sacrifice, or Yvonne Adhiambo's *Dust*, where Luo ghosts haunt arid farms). One might map colonial rupture and note dispossession's desecration (e.g., Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* severs Igbo earth rites via missionary incursions). Similarly, one might highlight restoration motifs and examine ubuntu/animism reviving harmony (as we have seen in Dangarembga's fractured Zimbabwean landscapes yearning for communal unhu).

Shifting, in conclusion, to Judaeo-Christian theology to undergird what we have considered in this essay, we cite "Laudato Si, on Care for Our Common Home", Francis's 2015 encyclical on faith and ecology. "The principle of the subordination of private property to the universal destination of goods", he writes, "and thus the right of everyone to their use, is a golden rule of social conduct" and "the first principle of the whole ethical and social order. The Christian tradition has never recognized the right to private property as absolute or inviolable, and has stressed the social purpose of all forms of private property" (Paragraph 93).

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